

**Rep. Rick Larsen**  
**Marine Resources Committee**  
**Tour Report**

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## Introduction

This report summarizes Representative Rick Larsen's efforts to promote estuary restoration and marine ecosystem health in and around Washington state's Second District. Representative Larsen recently visited projects with each of the five Marine Resources Committees (MRCs) in the Second District to hear about the work being done and how Congress can support local MRCs.

MRCs advise coastal counties in Washington state on issues related to marine conservation. The committees' composition varies by county but MRCs include a variety of community members such as local elected officials, business owners, tribal leaders, recreational organizations and conservation stakeholders. The MRCs' goal is to protect and restore marine resources in the Puget Sound and engage the local community through education, volunteering, scientific monitoring and restoration projects.

The MRCs work in concert with the Northwest Straits Commission (NWC) to improve the health of marine environments in Washington state. NWC provides support to seven county-based MRCs with funding and training and traces its roots to 1997, when Senator Patty Murray and former Representative Jack Metcalf established a blue-ribbon committee known as the Northwest Straits Initiative. In 1998, Congress authorized the NWC as part of legislation to codify an international fishery agreement. The NWC facilitates regional coordination among the MRCs and planning processes such as the Puget Sound Partnership's Action Agenda and the Puget Sound Nearshore Estuary Restoration Program (PSNERP).

## **Rep. Larsen's Support for MRC Projects**

### **Moving Forward Act**

The *Moving Forward Act* (H.R. 2) invests \$1.5 trillion over five years in essential infrastructure like transportation, schools and broadband. H.R. 2 also includes significant investment in public lands and resiliency to strengthen Washington state's coasts and restore critical marine habitats. Specifically, the bill authorizes:

- \$250 million for a new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Program Office for Puget Sound;
- \$3 billion to support shovel-ready coastal restoration projects focused on fish and wildlife conservation or climate change adaptation;
- \$50 million for living shoreline grants to improve coastal resilience; and
- \$250 million reauthorization of EPA's National Estuaries Program (NEP).

### **FY 2021 Appropriations**

Representative Larsen led and supported bipartisan efforts to secure federal funding for key estuary and coastal restoration programs in the FY 2021 appropriations bill. In December 2020, Congress passed a comprehensive FY 2021 spending package, which provides:

- \$65 million for the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund (PCSRF)
- \$700,000 for each NEP project and \$1.5 million for competitive NEP grants
- \$125.1 million for NOAA's ongoing marine mammal research and monitoring efforts
- Full \$900 million for the now permanent Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)
- \$33.75 million for the EPA's Puget Sound Geographic Program
- \$57.6 million for NOAA's Habitat Conservation and Restoration Program
- \$1.58 million for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## **Additional Environmental Legislation**

Representative Larsen is committed to protecting critical habitats and endangered wildlife in Northwest Washington. In the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, Representative Larsen:

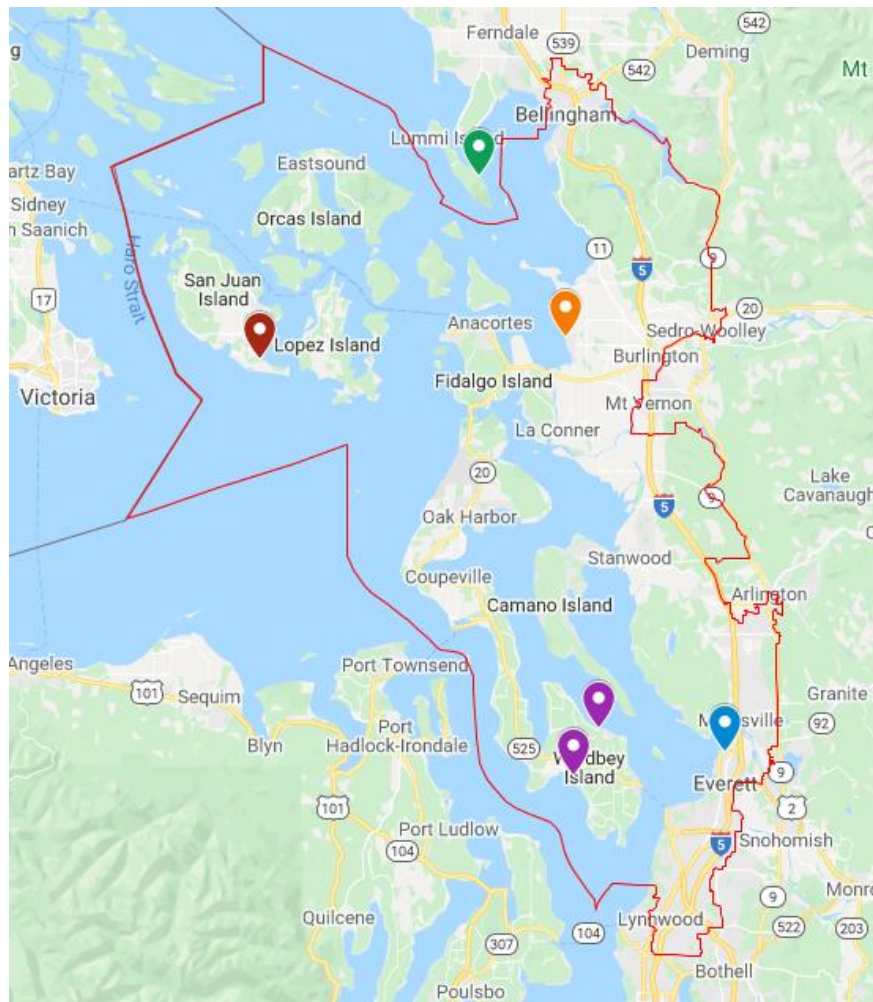
- Secured funding to improve salmon and steelhead passage and restore critical habitats under the *Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2020*. WRDA passed Congress as part of the FY 2021 spending package. He also introduced legislation with Representative Kim Schrier to help improve salmon and steelhead passage and habitats (H.R.7657).
- Voted for the FY 2021 *National Defense Authorization Act*, which requires the Coast Guard to report on improving SRKW conservation and related fisheries enforcement efforts. The bill also requires the U.S. Coast Guard and NOAA to assess methods to reduce noise impacts on SRKWs in Puget Sound.
- Supported the *Great American Outdoors Act*, which permanently and fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and addresses the growing maintenance backlog at the nation's parks and public lands.
- Introduced a bipartisan resolution (H.Res. 1078) designating the week of September 19 as "National Estuaries Week." The resolution has 32 cosponsors and is supported by the Association of National Estuary Programs, the National Estuarine Research Reserve Association, Restore America's Estuaries, Puget Sound Partnership and the Indian River Lagoon Council.

## 2020 MRC Visits

### Data

During September and October 2020, Representative Larsen visited six MRC projects across all five counties in the Second District. The projects he visited represent the different types of projects MRCs manage and were at various stages of completion:

September 28	Snohomish County MRC	Snohomish Estuary
October 7	Island County MRC	Seahorse Siesta
		Sunlight Shore
October 9	Whatcom County MRC	Aiston Preserve
October 14	Skagit County MRC	Padilla Bay
October 23	San Juan County MRC	Cattle Point Interpretive Area



Type of Project	Number of Projects Visited
Nearshore Restoration	2
Shore Friendly Program	1
Marine Stewardship Area	1
Vessel Impact Reduction	1
Kids on the Beach Program	1
Salish Sea Stewards Program	1
Piling Removal	1
Upland and Shoreline Restoration	1

Several federal funding sources supported these projects:

- National Estuary Program
- Marine Shoreline Protection Program
- Puget Sound Coastal Program
- *North American Wetland Conservation Act*

### **Key Themes**

The importance of partnerships between the MRCs and other local and statewide organizations was a common theme across all visits. NWC and the associated Northwest Straits Foundation (NWF) are key partners. The Commission's expertise in the federal and state grant process and project implementation is vital to the success of many MRC projects. MRCs also leverage public and private funds to support projects, often partnering with county natural resources departments on the grant applications.

MRCs play a pivotal role in the restoration of critical habitats in Washington state, particularly those for salmon and marine wildlife. Each project Representative Larsen visited focuses on the protection or restoration of habitat fundamental to the lifecycle of salmonids. This includes improving water quality and sediment flow as well as revitalization of habitat for each level of the food chain.

## **Visit Details**

### ***Island County***

Representative Larsen joined staff from the Island County MRC and the NWF to visit nearshore restoration projects at Seahorse Siesta and Sunlight Shores in South Whidbey Island.

Seahorse Siesta is a private community in Langley with beach access via a feeder bluff propped up by a large concrete barge. The restoration project involves removing the barge and stabilizing and revegetating the feeder bluff. The project will improve habitat for forage fish and salmon and restore natural sediment transport on the beach. Construction began in October and should be completed in a few months. The estimated project cost is \$500,000 and funding sources include NEP, Washington state's Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program, and the state Puget Sound Acquisition and Restoration Fund. NEP funding mainly supported community outreach efforts, which were crucial to project success because initially many local residents did not understand how removal of the barge would benefit the environment and improve beach access.

Sunlight Shores is a private community on the west side of State Route 525 with beach access to Useless Bay. MRC volunteers and homeowners completed the project in 2018 and involved removal of 350 feet of shoreline armoring, including creosote-treated wood. The project restored a quarter acre of riparian habitat and improved habitat for insects critical to the diet of juvenile salmonids. Homeowners in Sunlight Shores were motivated to do this project after hearing about the Shore Friendly Program. This partnership between the MRC and NWF uses state Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program funding to protect residential properties and fish, wildlife and shoreline habitats. The total project cost was \$170,000.

### ***San Juan County***

Representative Larsen visited the Cattle Point Interpretive Area on San Juan Island with San Juan MRC staff to discuss the county's Marine Stewardship Area (MSA) program. This area includes all county regulated waters. The MRC is tasked with maintaining a plan to guide marine resource protection, restoration and sustainable use for the next decade. It uses six community-determined strategies to protect the local environment:

- Reduce bio-accumulative toxins in the marine environment;



- Foster a marine stewardship ethic in residents and visitors;
- Manage upland and nearshore activities to reduce harm to marine habitat and water quality;
- Reduce the risk of large oil spills;
- Recover bottom fish species; and
- Preserve marine access and views.

The MRC also implemented new methods to reduce vessel impacts on Southern Resident killer whales. The “Be Whale Wise” program is a regional and local partnership to teach boaters travelling through the San Juan Islands to reduce negative effects on the local whale population. The MRC distributes flags for boaters to fly to notify other boaters when whales are nearby. The committee also provides program information at local events such as the Seattle Boat Show.

The MRC depends on federal funding for its projects, mostly via pass-through funding from the Washington State Salmon Recovery Board as well as from the EPA, NOAA and USFWS.

### ***Skagit County***

Representative Larsen met with staff from the Skagit County MRC, the Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) and the NWC at the Padilla Bay NERR to discuss the Salish Sea Stewards and Kids on the Beach programs.

Salish Sea Stewards, founded in 2018, is a volunteer training program for individuals learning about the marine environment. It helps connect trainees with volunteer opportunities in the community. Participants learn from local experts on issues impacting the Salish Sea and receive hands-on field training.

The Kids on the Beach program was also founded in 2018, in collaboration with the University of California Davis SeaDoc Society, to increase marine science interest in Skagit County middle schools. Students participate in hands-on marine science activities in the classroom and the Padilla Bay beach.

In the first year of the program, the Padilla Bay NERR staff worked with 8th grade students at Conway Middle School to prepare scientific proposals, design a research project, prepare field journals for data collection, collect field data and

conduct data analysis before presenting their results at a science symposium. The program plans to expand to more schools in the county.

The Kids on the Beach and Salish Sea Stewards programs have received \$500 and \$15,900 in federal funding, respectively, through EPA's NEP. The NERR received approximately \$728,000 in funding from NOAA this year.

### ***Snohomish County***

Representative Larsen met with Snohomish County MRC staff and committee members to hear about the MRC's Snohomish Estuary Pilings Prioritization project. The project created an inventory and prioritized list of independent pilings (those not providing structural support) to inform local stakeholders of pilings within their jurisdictions and provide guidance on piling removal. Creosote-treated pilings pose the most acute risk to water and sediment quality, but any pilings can block fish access to ecologically important habitat. This is especially true when they are clustered, as is often the case in the Snohomish River estuary.

The inventory was successful in identifying pilings and informing local stakeholders. Of the 15,564 independent pilings the project cataloged in the Snohomish River estuary, 40 percent are under Washington state jurisdiction, 29 percent are privately owned and 24 percent are on Port of Everett property. The remaining pilings are owned by the City of Everett (2 percent), Snohomish County (2 percent), City of Marysville (2 percent) and Tulalip Tribes (1 percent). Creosote-treated pilings accounted for only 16 percent of the inventory; MRC staff expected this number would be much higher. Many of the pilings are breaking down, which is concerning because of resulting floating debris and other safety issues. Some pilings break down just below the water line, causing safety hazards for recreationalists.

Funds for the pilings project came from the NWC, via pass through from the EPA and Washington State general appropriations. Additional funding for this project and all MRC work comes from Snohomish County Surface Water Management funds.

## ***Whatcom County***

Representative Larsen visited the Aiston Preserve project on Lummi Island with members of the Whatcom County MRC, Lummi Island Heritage Trust, NWC and Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu. The Aiston Preserve covers 105 acres with more than 4,000 feet of shoreline. The Lummi Island Heritage Trust purchased the property in 2015 after the previous owner, Lummi Rock LLC, went bankrupt. The Trust partnered with the NWF, the Rose Foundation, the Washington Department of Natural Resources, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Whatcom County to restore 20 acres of upland and 500 linear feet of shoreline degraded by years of gravel mining activity.

The partnership hopes to open the preserve to the public after restoration is completed. There will be walking trails throughout the preserve and a landing beach for kayakers and boaters. These features will help increase tourism to Lummi Island and create an economic partnership with the City of Bellingham through the new kayak and boating route.

The total cost of the project for acquisition, restoration, and public access is \$2.77 million. The federal portion totals \$780,000 from the EPA Marine Shoreline Protection Program, USFWS North American Wetlands Conservation Act and the USFWS Puget Sound Coastal Program. Additional funding is from the Whatcom County Conservation Futures Fund and the Rose Foundation.

## **Conclusion**

Representative Larsen's Fall 2020 MRC visits highlighted MRCs' important efforts to protect and restore critical marine habitat in Puget Sound. MRCs also underscore the need for increased and reliable funding for the NEP and the NWC. Representative Larsen continues to focus on securing federal funding for local efforts to restore Puget Sound for the people and the wildlife that call it home.